DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 379 EA 023 978

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TITLE Student Assessment: How Supervisors Can Help Teachers.
PUB DATE Apr 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (New Orleans, LA, April 4-7, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Interprofessional Relationship; *Professional Development; Staff Development; *Student Evaluation; *Supervisory Methods; *Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Supervision

ABSTRACT

Suggestions for improving teacher assessment of student performance are presented in this paper, with attention to ways in which superintendents can help. Suggested activities include pre- and post-observation conferences, a review of the teacher's plan book, and development of a professional growth plan. Because teachers as a group often lack adequate training in student assessment procedures, supervisors can act as staff developers to help teachers acquire the necessary skills. (22 references) (LMI)

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Student Assessment: How Supervisors can Help Teachers

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There is no question that the assessment of student performance is an important function of every teacher, and a major issue in contemporary education. There is also little question that many teachers are not sufficiently trained to provide high quality assessment. With this in mind, it becomes incumbent on the supervisor to provide assistance to teachers so they may become more proficient in their assessing techniques, and as such provide more reliable and realistic evaluations of student performance.

Importance and Teacher Competency

A student receives a "grade" or a "mark" and becomes aware of the teacher's assessment of performance. When report cards are sent home, parents react to what they see. The psychological impact that evaluation has on students is considerable, and frequently relationships at home between parent and child are effected by student performance. Any item having such an effect should be , at the very least, both accurate and fair. From an educational perspective, the assessment provided by teachers may well determine if promotion from one grade to another is possible, if students will be allowed to take certain courses, or if a student will succeed in gaining admission to a specific college. The educational impact of evaluation, as well as the psychological effect, make compelling arguments that teachers must be completely competent in developing and implementing fair and valid assessment procedures.

EA 023 978

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At least one author (Stiggins, 1988) has suggested that the most important issue in assessment is teacher directed assessment and that from 20% to 30% of a teacher's professional time is devoted to evaluation activities. With the process of assessment being so important one would expect at least a modicum of training in tests and measurements to be part of all pre-service teacher preparation programs. This, however, is not the case. Some investigators (Schafer and Lisstz, 1987; Popham and Hamberton, 1990) assert that one major difficulty in student evaluation is that most teachers do not receive any training in tests and measurements. One more recent study on the preparation of secondary teachers (Rieck, 1991) , however, has shown that a majority of colleges and Universities accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education do require a course in tests and measurements prior to graduation. Further, as early as 1989 a draft report of the Joint Committee for Standards for Teacher Competence in Educational Assessment of Students (Sanders, 1989) suggested changes in teacher preparation programs to assure teacher competence in evaluation of student performance. Even though the trend is strongly in favor of improved professional education in the area, we are still faced with the fact that literally hundreds of thousands of teachers may be currently employed who have not had the benefit of preparation in student evaluation procedures.

It is easy to find empirical evidence of the lack of teacher preparation in assessment. One just has to examine various traditional instruments such as teacher made tests and quizzes to note the considerable diversity in teacher competence with respect to the design and construction of test instruments. In addition, the literature has many examples of concerns over "grade inflation" which has occurred over the years (Creager et.al., 1969; Astin et.al., 1979;

Andrews, 1983). Such grade inflation may be, at least in part, related to inappropriate evaluative techniques and strategies on the part of teachers.

The Needs of Teachers

Teachers are not, nor do they need to be, experts in psychometric measurement. They do, however, need to have the skills necessary to:

1) Develop an assessment procedure suitable for the class or courses they teach and the student population they serve.
2) Develop traditional paper-pecil tests which are congruent with objectives and realistic in expectations.
3) Develop informal formative assessment procedures, both traditional and non-traditional, which will provide valuable feedback to both teacher and student.
4) Develop formal, formative assessment measures to provide data which, when considered with the summative test, will allow for a fair and equitable assignment of grades.

Assessment procedures vary greatly from teacher to teacher. There are those who give a test at the end of the unit; others may include many other sources of data in determining the grade. Many contemporary methods text authors (Clark and Starr,1991; Cangelosi, 1992; Kindsvatter et.al., 1992) advocate that multiple types of information be gathered from evaluative instruments by the teacher in making decisions about student performance. Indeed, the Louisiana teacher evaluation program (Ellett et. al., 1990) requires that teachers use multiple formative assessment procedures employing different types of items. Even from a common sense perspective, it makes good sense to

provide students with many opportunities on different types of evaluative experiences to demonstrate competence in a cognate area. Teachers, then, need to understand that:

1) There must be two or more different types of assessment on every topic or cognitive objective.
2) Assessment plans must maximize the opportunities that students have to demonstrate performance.
3) Assessment plans for a grading period should include as many different types of instruments or activities as possible.

The paper-pencil test is, perhaps, the most common form of evaluative device used by teachers. Unfortunately, it is frequently mis-used or abused. Tests and grades must reflect the objectives or goals which were the subject of instruction (Terwilliger,1989). This would suggest that teachers construct their own instruments based upon their objectives. Teachers, however, have frequently used tests prepared by the authors of text books, or contained in a computerized bank of questions. The problem with this is that author's objectives are not necessarily those of the teacher. Further, these types of purely objective tests frequently directly test only lower cognitive levels (Oosterhof, 1990). A special problem with computerized banks of questions was brought to me by an administrator who found that his biology teacher asked the computer to generate a random sample of multiple choice test items on a particular unit. The test was administered and the students complained because not a single item was on the test relative to a topic that the class spent two full days on. Such discrepancy between instructional emphasis and test design can not be accepted.

Paper-pencil tests should contain both objective and discussion items. The former allows for greater sampling and the latter allows for more in-depth evaluation involving higher order thinking skills. Such tests should also be structured such that objectives are covered in a manner which is roughly proportional to the importance of the objective and the class time devoted to the objective. In my view, teachers need to design the test so that the typical student in the class could earn a "C" . Difficult items, or those covering inter-relationships of objectives should be used as discriminators between "A" and "B" grades, not as indicators of minimum performance. In fact Gronlund (1973) has suggested the differentiation of objectives into basic and developmental categories with the basic objectives being used in the pass/fail decision and the developmental objectives being used as discriminators.

Informal (non-graded) assessment procedures are an essential aspect of total assessment. Procedures such as monitoring group work or guided practice, reviewing student home learning assignments, and reading student body language during class are excellent means of determining the current learning status of the students. These activities are clearly diagnostic in nature and provide the teacher with appropriate and immediate feedback on the progress of the lesson. Teachers need to understand that informal , formative assessment can provide them with data upon which to base future lessons. This assessment data may even indicate the need to re-teach a subject using a different approach. The informal nature of such activities does not diminish their importance, they serve only to punctuate the fact that assessment does not always result in a grade, but it does always provide data upon which to base future instructional decisions.

Formative assessment may also be of a formal (graded) nature. Such instruments and activities can be both diagnostic and evaluative. One could

look at the formative phase as the process of building a student portfolio of measures designed to assess overall performance on a unit. The unit test is simply the summative formal evaluation instrument and one factor in evaluating the total performance of the class.

Using formative measures, both formal and informal, prior to summative evaluation has been documented to improve learning ,instructional planning, and the teaching process (Peterson, et. al., 1978; Mintz, 1979; Fuchs, et. al., 1984 Bangert-Drowns, et. al., 1986). Since the goal of any teacher is to improve the learning of students it should behoove each teacher to employ as much formative evaluation as possible.

How Supervisors Can Help

Supervision of instruction is more than reviewing curricula materials and making occasional visits to classrooms. The supervisor has an obligation to do what he or she can to improve the instructional process. In fact, at least one prominent educator (Manatt, 1988) has suggested that any good school system should not merely evaluate teacher performance but help to improve it. Couple this with the fact that most teachers truly do want to improve their performance (Dillon-Peterson, 1986) , and we have a strong argument for active supervisory involvement in the improvement process.

The question remains as to how the supervisor should get involved and what the supervisor can do to assist. The next few paragraphs will make some concrete suggestions.

Supervisors should review each teacher's total assessment plan at the start of the year. At that time suggestions can be made as to the variety of evaluation factors to be considered, the relative strength of each factor, and what types of informal procedures would be used in the ongoing diagnosis of

student difficulties. Clearly, a supervisor can not impose his or her will with respect to evaluation on the teacher. Just as clearly, however, it is appropriate for a supervisor to provide some general guidelines and to offer suggestions. For example, a supervisor can , perhaps, require that at least three types of assessment be employed, but probably should not dictate what they should be. A frank and professional discussion on such matters may be of significant benefit to the teacher and result in an improved system, even if it is not the ideal approach desired by the supervisor.

In holding pre and post observation conferences supervisors should ask questions such as:

1) What informal formative assessment will you be using (or did you use)?
2) Based on your informal assessment, how well do you feel the students are grasping the material?
3) How will the informal assessment of today's lesson effect your lesson tomorrow?

If teachers can not effectively answer these questions, there is room for the supervisor to provide assistance in an open and collegial way. At this point the assumption is being made that we are in a professional improvement mode and that the supervisor is not making written reports on "growth areas" for the teacher's file, as that would elevate anxiety and possibly produce a strong impediment to future growth , as well as to the teacher-supervisor relationship.

Supervisors should consider asking for a teacher's unit test once each year. Along with the test, the supervisor should examine the plan book of the teacher. The test would then be reviewed from many perspectives, the most important of which may be:

1) To verify that all instructional objectives are tested, and no test items are not covered by objectives.

2) To verify that the test has a variety of different types of items and that those items test on both higher and lower levels of the taxonomy.

3) To verify the test is constructed in such a way so as to reflect the relative importance of and time spent on objectives.

4) To verify that test items are well constructed, eg. multiple choice items have reasonable distractors.

Once the analysis is conducted, the supervisor then reviews the results with the teacher and they can mutually look for ways of improvement, if improvement is necessary. Frequently, examining student results on the instrument will provide a clue as to the reasonableness of the test, or the quality of instruction.

it may be that a supervisor notes similar concerns with a number of teachers. This would provide an opportunity to construct a staff development program for a group of professionals. Because of differences in assessment needs at various levels, some differentiation in program is necessary. In the elementary school grade level meetings may be most effective while in secondary schools such programs may be based on subject areas. Approaching the problem in this way will keep numbers down, allow group processing and interaction, and stress the supportive rather than the directive role of the supervisor. There are, however, times when individual teachers, rather than groups of teachers, may need to be assisted.

Conferences with an individual teacher relative to findings on assessment should be highly collegial. The supervisor should ask questions on items where there is concern, but those questions should not be judgmental. For example, the question "I was wondering what you were aiming

for with this?" is better than "Why in the world did you do this, I see no purpose in it?" It would be hoped that the teacher recognize those aspects of assessment where there was need for growth and, further, that he or she would ask for some assistance. The supervisor must provide assistance in a cooperative and friendly way. It would be a poor practice for a supervisor to raise questions without being able to also give the concrete help necessary to aid the teacher to improve in that particular aspect of performance.

It would be assumed that friendly, professional conferences would result in sincere efforts toward improvement. When this happens, true growth takes place and everyone, including students, reaps the rewards. There are, however, some teachers who may not respond positively. When there is no sincere voluntary effort to grow on the part of the teacher, it may become necessary to move the role of supervisor from informal to formal. In other words, it is time to be somewhat directive and to use the position of supervisor to encourage change in a more direct way.

The supervisor and teacher can construct a "mini" staff development plan for the teacher, a plan designed to help the teacher grow in the area of assessment. In some locations this may be easier than in others. For example, New Jersey requires each teacher to have a "Professional Improvement Plan" and it has been shown (Rieck, 1989) how this concept can be used to direct a teacher's efforts in a particular area where growth is needed. In states, or districts, without such requirements other approaches can be used.

Most districts permit the supervisor to make recommendations for improvement. At times the recommendation may be a simple statement. If true growth is to take place, however, the recommendation can take the form of an improvement plan. Such a plan should:

1) State the specific area where growth is to take place.

2) Indicate why there is a need for growth, citing evidence as appropriate.

3) Indicate (mutually developed if possible) the goals for the plan , the steps that the teacher will take, and the assistance the supervisor will provide in helping the teacher achieve the desired growth.

4) Provide a time frame during which the improvement process will take place.

5) Indicate what informal formative assessments of teacher progress will be made, and when they will be made.

6) Indicate what criteria will be used to determine if the teacher has demonstrated a satisfactory level of growth.

Following some type of professional growth plan, such as outlined above, should provide the necessary growth and improve teacher competency in the area of student assessment; and that is, after all, our goal.

Summary

Research has shown that teachers, as a group, are not as well prepared in assessment procedures as would be desired. In today's school room it is important that assessment be as fair and as professional as possible. The supervisor can assume the role of staff developer in helping teachers acquire the skills necessary to be effective evaluators capable of using a variety of formative and summative approaches in appraising the performance of students.

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